

Acts 16: 9-15
Psalm 67
Revelation 21: 10, 22-22: 5
St. John 5: 1-9

Rogation Sunday 2022.

“And at once the man was healed.”

John 5: 9a

I’m very pleased for us to be engaging with another chapter in our sermon series about being “disciples” – that is, how do we follow Jesus Christ in a practical way in our daily lives – as individuals, households, and as the local expression of Church?... So far in the sermon series, we’ve considered money; prayer; and hospitality... I’m genuinely excited with today’s topic, but I’m not going to tell you what it is quite yet!...

First, I’d like us to recall a movie which some of us have seen, called, *The Emperor’s New Groove*... It’s a movie for all ages, mostly about a young man (the Emperor) who needs to learn more about humility... But there’s also a delicious female villain in the movie, and she has a sidekick – we might say he’s not the sharpest knife in the drawer – named Kronk. [On the screen there’s a drawing of Kronk...]

Kronk has an enormously developed upper body; but in comparison, much more skinny legs. If Kronk worked out in a gym, we might say that he used all the machines to develop upper body strength, but he skipped “leg day...” That is, Kronk didn’t develop any muscles around his hips and legs... As a result, Kronk sometimes looks as if he will topple over, imbalanced...

But how Kronk looks *physically*, some Christians can be, spiritually... Kind of – out of balance... Maybe, for instance, we’re used to developing devotion in our hearts, but we aren’t used to exercising our minds as followers of Jesus Christ... In fact, however, God has given you and me *minds* – intellect; the capacity to reason and to remember – and this too is to be offered in service to the living God...

So let’s have some fun: Let’s put on our seatbelts, and develop another part of following the Lord Jesus which we might not have exercised for a while: One part of Christian living is to *learn*, to understand, in our practices of worship. Let’s talk about the sacraments...

Let’s have a short refresher: What *is* a sacrament? Following the teaching of this amazing bishop, Augustine of Hippo, Africa, Christians have said that in a sacrament, we see something on the outside. God does something on the inside... We see something on the outside. God does something on the inside...

Let’s talk about one of the sacraments which the Lord Jesus specifically commanded us to do: The sacrament of baptism. [BCP, p. 550] What’s the thing we see on the outside, in Christian baptism? Water!... Maybe lots of water... On the inside, God is giving us a new start – a new life of grace...

Along with most of the worldwide Church, Anglicans baptize babies and young children as well as adults. Obviously, adults can speak for themselves. For those baptized as babies, there comes a time for us all when we have to decide if we will follow Christ for ourselves (or not), as we grow up... But God begins to work in our lives long before we become aware of his grace...

The risen Jesus Christ specifically linked “baptism” with “discipleship.” No wonder we talk about the sacrament of baptism in a sermon series about discipleship! The Great Commission, from Matthew 28:

And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

Okay; so the sacrament of Baptism has 2 parts – the water we see on the outside, and God’s new start and grace on the inside. When we have faith, we receive the benefit of the sacraments [see Article 29, p. 710]...

Another sacrament specifically commanded by Jesus Christ is Holy Communion (also called the Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper, or the Mass)... On the night he was betrayed, Christ said to the assembled apostles, “Do this, in remembrance of me...” Again, most of the worldwide Christian Church members agree that when we share Communion, we’re not just recalling an event in the *past* (although we do that too)... God is also at work in our lives in the present – pouring his grace into our hearts...

In baptism, the outward sign is water, and God’s inner work is a new spiritual beginning in us... In the Holy Communion, the outward thing – the thing we see – is bread and wine... At same time, we identify that we’re receiving Christ’s body and blood, a means of grace we receive into our lives. After all, the Lord’s words were, “*This* is my Body... *this* is my Blood...”

Now, here’s where it gets a little tricky: A long time ago, some genius said, “Okay, outwardly it’s clear what we *see* as we share the eucharist. We know that God is up to something wonderful when we’re opening our lives to him, and to one another (because we’re in deep unity as we share the sacrament together)... How does that work, exactly?... In what sense do we say that God is “present” in communion? Isn’t God – everywhere?...”

God is indeed everywhere, except in the presence of sin!... But there are special touch points between heaven and earth, and the eucharistic celebration is one of them!... Unlike some denominations, Anglicans have tried not to define too sharply or too narrowly exactly how God is at work. Tertullian, a second century teacher, insisted that exactly how God works is a *mysterium* – a mystery – which humans can never fully capture or convey... We tend to use the preposition “through...” It is “through” or “in” sharing communion together that we receive its benefits.

[BCP p. 83] The Prayer of Humble Access, which we so often say together, expresses it beautifully,

Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of our dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his Body, and our souls washed through his most precious Blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us...

The perfect shedding of Christ's blood was on the cross. But in some sense we are sharing it, as we share in communion...

Now, earlier in the Church's history, there were great debates about exactly how many sacraments there are. One theologian in the 12th century argued there were 30 sacraments. But over time, the list was whittled down: All agree that Baptism and the Eucharist commanded sacramental acts explicitly commanded by the Lord Jesus. For some Protestant churches, that's as far as they go...

But in the eastern Orthodox churches, and in the Catholic tradition of the Church, other sacraments are included: Confirmation; Marriage; Ordination (in the Anglican Church, for instance, ordinations are carried out by bishops to the orders of deacon, priest and bishop); Anointing the sick (also called "unction"); and Reconciliation, or penance... Let's have those again: Confirmation, marriage, ordination, anointing and reconciliation...

Everyone agrees that Marriage is a wonderful sacramental commitment. Who can object to Anointing? – specifically commanded in the Letter of James. We heard proclaimed Christ's healing work in today's gospel reading. Confirmation and Ordination aren't controversial among most Christians...

What's the sticky one, historically?... Reconciliation... You see, in the late Medieval Church, there were some troubling pastoral practices around penance. (I won't go into these historical events today, and how the Church on earth sometimes has not shone best with the Gospel of Jesus.) These practices, fortunately, have been largely reformed... When English Christian identity was developing, some folks were nervous about the practice of private confession as it was being offered in the late Medieval Church...

In practice today, we offer a public confession together almost every Sunday at St. Brice's. If our consciences are bothering us, liturgies of private confession are open to us all, using the older *Book of Common Prayer* or the newer *Book of Alternative Services* liturgies... At St. Brice's, when someone asks me to hear a private confession, it's usually in the season of Lent. As is the Anglican practice, I offer counsel and God's forgiveness, but the speaker doesn't have to carry out special devotions...

So, all of this can sound like a lot of theory – the outward part we see; the inward part God does; the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion specifically commanded by the Lord Jesus; and other sacramental rites we often celebrate – Confirmation, Marriage, Ordination, Healing and Reconciliation...

Yet, the sacraments aren't meant to be theoretical at all!... You are baptised – you belong to Jesus Christ. His Spirit dwells in you. (Or if you're not baptized, for heaven's sake, why wait?)... In a few minutes, once again, we'll celebrate the Eucharist together. God is at work when we receive!... We receive the ministries of healing and reconciliation and so on as appropriate. Some of us are blessed with the gift of marriage. This is not "pie in the sky." This is about learning to live with and for Jesus, together, each week... Let's especially treasure communion this morning – that "we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us."

Amen.